

**From:** Lawrence, Rob  
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## Legislature deadlocks on Texas Railroad Commission



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Legislation overhauling the state's oil and gas regulators has been given up for dead after controversy erupted around new campaign finance rules.

A bill by state Sen. Robert Nichols, R-Jacksonville, seeking to make changes at the Texas Railroad Commission was left pending in the House's Energy Resources Commission on Tuesday. With two weeks left until legislators head home, the bill would probably have to wait at least two years until next session, aides said.

The Railroad Commission was under sunset review, a process by which the Legislature examines and makes changes to or abolishes state agencies every 12 years.

But provisions in the legislation that forced commissioners to resign to run for another office and restricted their campaign donations to the 17 months around an election ruffled the state's political establishment.

Nichols' office said the senator was not available for comment.

The Railroad Commission, which oversees oilfield production and sets drilling rules, has long been seen in Austin as a steppingstone to higher office, said Tom Smith, director of Public Citizen, a watchdog group that campaigned for the changes.

"I think the [oil and gas] industry sees no bill as better than any bill with reforms in it," he said. "Those who have attempted to fix the chronic problems over there [at the Railroad Commission] lose."

But Deb Hastings, executive vice president of the Texas Oil and Gas Association, disagreed with that assessment and said the industry had purposefully avoided taking a stance on campaign finance.

“Some of those issues seemed the straw that would break the camel’s back,” she said. “The simple fact of extending the commission and giving that predictability was very important to us.”

Throughout the legislative session, opponents argued that the changes unfairly singled out the railroad commissioners and left other elected officials untouched. One of the loudest voices was Rep. Tom Craddick, R-Midland, the former House speaker whose district has seen an economic resurgence since the oil shale boom hit Texas.

His daughter, Christi Craddick, sits on the Railroad Commission,

Other provisions within Nichols’ bill also proved controversial.

A proposal to change the commission’s name to some variation of the Texas Energy Commission upset some who thought the state was giving up a global brand name built up over almost a century in the oil industry.

Tuesday’s stalemate marked the second session in a row that the Legislature was unable to pass sunset legislation for the Railroad Commission.

The Legislature is expected to vote in the coming weeks to keep the commission operating until a compromise can be reached.

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